

Perspectives

The Brent Spar Controversy: An Example of Risk Communication Gone Wrong

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This perspective piece uses the theories and ideas of risk communication to shed light on the reasons why the proposed dumping of Brent Spar in the U.K. offshore waters caused such an international uproar. We postulate that the Brent Spar crisis is a classic example of risk communication gone wrong. Had the sinking of the storage buoy not been amplified by the media and the environmental group Greenpeace, and had not the U.K. Government nor Shell come across as distrustful it would probably have taken place without any public notice. We examine some of the main reasons why Greenpeace succeeded in its risk communication and Shell/the U.K. Government failed. We conclude with a discussion concerning some of the risk communication lessons learned from this crisis.

KEY WORDS: Brent Spar; risk communication; environmental crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is hard to remember an environmental controversy that has received as much media attention as the proposed sinking of the Brent Spar oil storage platform jointly owned by Shell and Exxon on the North Atlantic sea bed. The episode caused a great deal of embarrassment for Shell, who applied for deep sea disposal, as well as for John Major and the British Government who defended Shell's decision as the Best Practicable Environmental Option (BPEO). Greenpeace, in particular their activists in Germany, mounted a massive campaign against the sinking of the Brent Spar which eventually prompted the German, Danish, and Swedish governments to deplore its dumping. The arguments about how the Brent Spar buoy should be disposed of were many, but the environmental reality of the options played little part as the controversy reached the boiling point.

What makes the Brent Spar controversy interesting is that it was an environmental "non-issue" until the abandoned oil storage buoy was occupied by Greenpeace activists at the end of April 1995. In this paper, we first report on the case history, and then shed light on it with regard to the ideas and conclusions put forward in the risk communication literature. In conclusion, we draw some general conclusions with respect to risk communication.

2. CASE HISTORY

In early 1994, two oil giants, Shell and Exxon, had a problem with the disposal of the oil storage buoy named Brent Spar.⁴ The buoy, originally commissioned in 1976, had been nonoperational for 5 years and was now seen as redundant. Disposing Brent Spar posed a conundrum as the owners were not required by law to dispose of the buoy on land: the buoy was located in

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⁴ Although the platform was jointly owned, Shell had operational control of the platform and was thereby in charge of decommissioning procedure.

deep water (more than 75 meters) and as it weighed more than 4000 tons (actual weight was 14,500 tons), the International Maritime Organisation's guidelines stipulate that sinking of the structure in the ocean is an acceptable option. As a result, Shell commissioned no less than 30 separate studies to consider the technical, safety, and environmental implications of its disposal. Shell came up with four different options:

- Disposal on land
- Sinking the buoy at its current location
- Decomposition of the buoy on the spot
- Deep sea dumping (but within U.K. waters)

After thorough examination of these options, Shell decided to implement the fourth option, mainly due to its fairly low cost with little environmental impact (BPEO). The second most realistic option, that of horizontal dismantlement on land, was seen to be four times more expensive and high risk for workers (six times higher) and low but measurable risk of pollution of inshore water in the case of an accidental break-up during transport.^(1,2) The other options were seen to be either unfeasible or environmentally harmful.

On the basis of the results of the consulting studies, Shell asked the U.K. Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) for permission to dump the buoy in the deep sea, as this was in their opinion the BPEO. In December 1994, DTI approved the strategy. Under the guidelines of the new convention on the marine environment (the Oslo-Paris Convention), the U.K. Government notified other European nations on February 16 of Shell's plan to sink the platform. As no country responded within the 60-day deadline for objections imposed by the Convention (i.e., by April 16), the U.K. Government issued Shell the disposal license in the first week of May. However, before the license was issued Greenpeace occupied Brent Spar on April 30.

Following this initial occupation, the crisis began to unfold. After the Greenpeace occupation, the Brent Spar controversy hit the media with pictures of Greenpeace activists braving the water cannons of Shell's tugboats. On May 9, the German Environmental and Agricultural Ministries protested to the U.K. Government that land disposal had not been significantly investigated. As the protest came in after the deadline the U.K. Government rejected it. Throughout May, Brent Spar remained high on the media agenda. In the period of May 20-30, for instance, Greenpeace mobilized politicians against deep sea sinking by collecting signatures, and on May 26, conservative groups joined Green action groups in asking for a consumer boycott of Shell gasoline stations. The boycott was effective in Germany,

Holland, and parts of Scandinavia. On May 23, however, after several attempts, Shell was finally able to remove the Greenpeace activists from the platform. On June 1, after much campaigning against Shell, the results of a poll in Germany suggested that 74% of the population were willing to boycott Shell gas stations (the survey was financed by Greenpeace).

The controversy, however, did not die down with the protesters removed from the platform. On June 5, the North Sea Protection Conference took place in Esbjerg, Denmark, and was attended by the Environmental Ministers from the countries surrounding the North Sea and by the EU Environmental Commissioner, Ritt Bjerregaard. At the opening of the conference, virtually all the official delegates (except the U.K. and Norway) condemned the sinking of the platform and the U.K. Environmental Minister, John Gummer, was singled out for a large amount of critique which was widely reported in the press. On June 6, the German Environmental Minister, Angela Merkel demanded a complete halt of deep ocean disposal, including oil platforms. At the same time at the G7 summit in Canada, Helmut Kohl informed John Major that stopping the sea dumping of Brent Spar was "not the looniness of a few greens but a Europe-wide, worldwide trend for the protection of our seas."

On June 16, the platform was again occupied by Greenpeace activists. At this time, Greenpeace made claims that there were large quantities of heavy metals and other highly toxic organic material in the tanks that had not been declared by Shell. On the same day, protesters moved in on Shell headquarters in the Netherlands.

Throughout the crisis, Shell U.K. received little support. The U.K. Government was active in trying to persuade its European allies that the deep sea sinking of the Brent Spar was in fact the BPEO, but these arguments fell on deaf ears. Additionally, Shell U.K.'s position was becoming increasingly untenable due to pressure from Shell Germany and the Netherlands. The company was receiving very negative PR in these two countries. For instance, at Shell's 1728 stations in Germany, gasoline sales were 20% below average, 200 stations were threatened with attacks, 50 stations were vandalized, two stations were firebombed and shots were fired at another. In addition, due to the Greenpeace campaign, Germans were writing letters to the U.K. DTI and enclosing money to help to pay for on-shore disposal and German women were sending pictures of their children to Shell U.K. urging its chairman, Dr. Chris Fay, to stop the planned sinking for the benefit of future generations. During this period, Shell Germany received over 11,000 letters complaining about the disposal.

In the face of this level of opposition, Shell announced on the June 20, that it had called off plans to sink the Brent Spar, only hours before it was due to be sunk. It cited economic problems due to the boycott. The U.K. Government felt betrayed, and the Energy Minister, Tim Eggar, stated that Shell should have gone through with the deep sea dumping as it is the BPEO. Following Shell's reversal on the sinking, Greenpeace issued a statement applauding the action and announced that it would help Shell to find an acceptable environmental solution. A poll in Germany indicated that 82% of those interviewed supported boycotts such as the one against Shell as a means for consumers to fight environmentally harmful practices.

However, the fallout continued. The U.K. Government felt that they had been unfairly treated by their European colleagues, views which were shared by some of the U.K. press.

On June 27, Shell started a damage limitation exercise aimed at German and Danish consumers. In Germany, they took out a one-page advertisement in 100 national and local newspapers with the title "We will change." In these, Shell admitted to mistakes and ill-advised Brent Spar policies, but maintained that the decision to dump at sea was correct on technical and environmental grounds. In Denmark, Shell sent letters to 250,000 credit card holders explaining their policies. In July 1995, Shell asked the Norwegian company Det Norske Veritas to investigate the accusations made by Greenpeace about the contents of Brent Spar's empty storage tanks (particularly the statement that they still contained 5000 tons of crude oil). This independent inventory of Brent Spar's contents was published in the fall of 1995, broadly confirming the figures provided by Shell.⁽³⁾ A few weeks prior to the report of these findings, Greenpeace admitted that it had made a mistake about the quantity of the remaining pollutants, but maintained that the sinking of Brent Spar would have been wrong.

2.1. The Risks of Deep Ocean Disposal

According to Shell's commissioned studies, the risks posed by the sinking of Brent Spar were quantified: occupational risk was highest with land dismantling and lowest with on the spot sinking. Environmental risks were also low for deep sea disposal. According to these studies, sinking Brent Spar in the deep sea did not pose any significant environmental problems. The total inventory of the hazardous materials within the buoy were minimal: several thousand tons of oil and oily sand,

slightly radioactive scale, some oil remnants, and other chemicals. In all, the total quantity was less than 1 % of the amounts discharged by boats in the North Sea in the course of 1 year. However, there was a fear of local environmental contamination in the deep sea where Brent Spar would have been dumped which had not been thoroughly researched, although overall experts maintained that the impact was minute relative to existing levels of ocean pollution.

The U.K. Select Committee on Science and Technology confirmed the low risk situation and expressed approval of the deep sea disposal option.⁽⁴⁾ In May 1996, the Government's Scientific Group on Decommissioning (commonly referred to as the Shepard Commission), composed of an independent group of scientists set up specifically to consider the scientific environmental aspects of the deep sea disposal of Brent Spar, also broadly confirmed the scientific assessment of Shell's analysis, but did conclude that: more open procedures were needed, greater mobilization of scientific expertise, international discussions on these types of topics were needed, and that public perceptions needed to be accounted for.⁽⁵⁾

So what went wrong? Why did Shell lose its credibility? Why was the public protest so overwhelming? Why was the boycott so successful? We feel that it has a great deal to do with Shell and the U.K. Government implementing the wrong risk communication strategy.

3. REASONS WHY SHELL'S RISK COMMUNICATION PROGRAM FAILED

One issue was the attribution of blame to two actors, Shell in the first instance for taking the policy decision that deep sea disposal was the BPEO; and the U.K. Government in the second for standing by Shell. Related to this, Shell was seen as a big business, being a Transnational corporation, and its defeat at the hands of the public and Greenpeace was described by one U.K. newspaper as a "victory for democracy" (which, of course, raises further questions about the presence of democratic procedure with Greenpeace itself). Finally, there was the so-called David and Goliath effect. Greenpeace, David, with its brave activists who occupied the platform, "slew" the big villain, Shell, Goliath, and the media loved it.

Second, Shell was seen to be greedy. Shell had the necessary capital to choose a more environmentally benign (land disposal) option. In this instance, Shell lost credibility, as the public saw that it was no coincidence that the BPEO was also the cheapest option.

Third, Shell was seen as an easy target to boycott (most motorists are unaware of Shell's large holdings in the chemical sector). It is not a company such as Philip Morris, who has many brand names and is diversified in food and tobacco. A boycott of Shell simply involves driving to another gas station. People experienced the "feel good factor," as they felt that they had acted in an "environmentally correct" way without any discomfort or change of habit.

Fourth, politicians (with the exception those in the U.K. and Norway) were heavily engaged in condemning Shell as it was an easy way of attracting green votes. Germany, Denmark, and Sweden, the nations most opposed to deep sea dumping, do not have any oil reserves of their own, so supporting the public protest of Shell did not affect them economically. Rather, it gave a chance for the politicians to exercise their green credentials, without any financial or political costs.

Finally, there was a moral issue, that of the sanctity of the deep ocean. One should not dump in it as it supposedly has not been dumped in before. It should remain pristine and untouched.

3.1. The Promoters of the Crisis

There were many factors that ensured that Brent Spar remained on the media agenda.

First, there were good pictures, largely provided by Greenpeace: e.g., pictures of activists on the platform being sprayed by Shell's tugboats.

Second, there were a series of negative factors attached to the proponents of Brent Spar. Shell, as a transnational corporation, is seen to have low public trust as does the U.K. Government.^(6,7) During the Brent Spar crisis, Shell's actions did little to instill greater trust among the public. The company was non-univocal, the messages it relayed were at times confusing, and at others arrogant. The U.K. Government was portrayed by the media as siding with industry, and being both arrogant and stubborn which did not help its public image of trustworthiness.

Third, the controversy came to dominate international meetings. As we described above, it featured heavily in the North Sea Conference held in Denmark. It also arose at the G7 meeting in Canada. The reasons why Brent Spar was highlighted in this way were: due to the confusion of where exactly the dump site was located, it enabled Greenpeace to spread the message that the North Sea was at risk. Second, there was the "free ride" effect for politicians, as most of the nations

opposing the deep sea dumping do not have oil reserves of their own.

3.2. The Failure of the Counter-Information

If there were factors ensuring Brent Spar stayed on the media agenda, one wonders why Shell and/or the U.K. Government did not launch their own more positive risk communication strategy.

There were several weaknesses with the communication strategies of both Shell and the U.K. Government. They both adopted a top-down approach rather than a dialogue approach, the latter strongly supported by risk communication research.⁽⁸⁻¹¹⁾ In so doing, they alienated the public immediately, and came across as arrogant and unmovable. Once the amplification process was at full speed, time was running out to launch such a dialogue approach.

Second, Shell was not seen as trustworthy, while Greenpeace was. Results from past research shows that in general the public, at least in the U.K. and Germany, trust NGOs more than they do industry or government.^(6,7) Shell was unable to reduce the public's distrust of them due to a confusing mix of information on the Brent Spar from Shell's offices in the U.K. and Germany. In other words, Shell did not have one voice, but Greenpeace did, which strengthened their argument.

Third, Shell could not counter the symbolic meaning of dumping in the deep sea. It is difficult to counter a "gut reaction" that deep sea dumping is morally wrong. As John Shepherd, chairman of the Scientific Group on Decommissioning recently said, "If people have an emotional response to pristine areas such like Antarctica or the deep sea, and want them to remain unpolluted, it is not up to scientists to say this is irrational." (as cited in Ref. 12, p. 14).

Fourth, as the Shepherd report states, the scientists who really knew something about the deep sea and the consequences dumping Brent Spar were not consulted. In other words, Shell did not use the scientific expertise available to counter the claims made by Greenpeace.⁽¹³⁾

Finally, the media coverage was largely dominated by footage provided by Greenpeace and sent to the major television networks. Greenpeace had taken the initiative and produced highly visible actions, while Shell was forced to react and defend themselves.

4. DISCUSSION—LESSONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION

Could a controversy such as Brent Spar have been avoided once the buoy was occupied by Greenpeace?

There is no clear answer to this. Unlike other environmental protests in 1995, such as the attempts by Greenpeace to highlight the inactions of environmental policymakers in reducing CO₂ emissions at the Berlin Climate Conference in April 1995, the Brent Spar had a series of factors stacked against it as identified above: it was an environmental issue associated with the oil industry which everybody loves to hate; it was a problem in which blame could easily be assigned (unlike CO₂ emissions to which we all contribute); the oil storage buoy was an easy symbol to identify with environmental waste; there was the moral issue of dumping in virgin environmental areas; and Shell and the U.K. Government acted arrogantly throughout the entire process without considering dialogue as a possibility.

There are several lessons that can be learned from the Brent Spar controversy that might help to ensure that future crises of this type are minimized:

Most obviously, a company such as Shell should have adopted a dialogue approach before escalation of the cause. That is to say, it is essential to have a reciprocal strategy where attempts are made to promote dialogue between the public, special interest groups and "experts" in order to derive solutions acceptable to everyone.⁽¹⁰⁾ The top-down approach used by Shell is not a viable option as research suggests that "experts" themselves can be biased (or at least motivated by interest and values like everybody else), and that most participants in the risk debate "have fundamentally different values and priorities which shape their definitions and judgments of risk and acceptability" (Ref. 9, p. 54), be they lay citizens or experts.^(14,15) Dialogic approaches help to see the logic and rationale of cognitive frames that affects one's own frame. Apparently, this is something that Shell is now trying to do.⁽²⁾

Industry needs to develop better and more flexible communication strategies to address criticisms from hostile groups. For example, there could be an independent peer review of any actions carried out by Shell or any other industry for that matter that may mobilize public opposition. These reviews should be published before actions are taken. This ensures that critical marks focus on the issue itself rather than on the organization as a whole. Additionally, some of the most critical representatives should be on the decision-making board in order to ensure openness and empowerment, something that was also briefly mentioned in the Shepherd report⁽¹³⁾ and which has already occurred in Sweden concerning an international controversy surrounding the Barsebäck nuclear power station.⁽¹⁶⁾

Advice concerning how best to deal with these types of crisis should be sought from noninvolved social

scientists or media counselors. In the Brent Spar case, such advice was sought only after the controversy was well established.

Companies should also organize panels or focus groups in different countries to account for differences in public perceptions among affected nations. As has been described in this paper, the Germans, for instance, had very different views of Brent Spar than the U.K. public. Related to this, there is a need to improve consultation and communication with political agencies in other countries. Of particular importance is to test their agreement or approval if new methods are introduced or public outcry is likely to occur.⁵ The elimination of the so-called "surprise" factor is a necessity in order to reduce conflicts similar to Brent Spar.

Industry would benefit from a greater understanding of the underlying concerns and fears of the public. It is a strategy that Greenpeace has employed successfully, enabling them to identify which environmental issues have the greatest resonance for the public (e.g., whaling) and launch campaigns around these issues.

Industry, especially multinationals, should have uniform and unambiguous communication strategies both internally and between different countries. Mixed messages do not help industry's communication efforts. This was clearly seen in the Brent Spar case, where Shell U.K. was issuing different and often contradictory statements to Shell Germany.

Government licensing agencies should at all times claim independence of special interests. Solidarity with the proposer is not necessary even if the agency in fact agrees with the proposer, as this may be seen in a bad light. This was clearly depicted in the Brent Spar case where foreign publics saw Shell and the U.K. government working together. Rather, licensing agencies should emphasize control and accountability.

Finally, industries and NGOs alike should strive to form alliances with well-respected allies. With Brent Spar, Shell was only supported by the U.K. government, while Greenpeace received the support of several European governments, the European Union, and a large number of the European public.

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⁵ The international dimension was also mentioned in two specific contexts by the Shepherd report. Specifically, some of the best dumping sites may be in international waters and, second, there is no such thing as total containment in the sea, i.e., contaminants dumped in one country's territory will not necessarily stay there.

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